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About the Human Condition in the Works of Dickens and Marx

Ami E. Stearns
University of Oklahoma

Thomas J. Burns
University of Oklahoma

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Volume 13 Issue 4 (December 2011) Article 10

Ami E. Stearns and Thomas J. Burns,

"About the Human Condition in the Works of Dickens and Marx"

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Abstract: In their article "About the Human Condition in the Works of Dickens and Marx" Ami E. Stearns and Thomas J. Burns contribute to the study of Charles Dickens's Industrial Revolution-era fiction by examining his novels in relation to Karl Marx's social philosophy. Stearns and Burns postulate that Dickens relies on Marxist concepts of class consciousness, sacrifice, revolution, social antitheses, and social injustice to weave his narratives and compare and discuss six of Dickens' novels: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Great Expectations* with three works of Marx: *Grundrisse*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Capital*. Their analysis suggests that the fictionalized world of Dickens parallels the fundamental social theses in Marx's writings. Further, their study reveals that the narratives of Dickens present Marx's concepts as relevant and accessible within popular imagination.

Ami E. STEARNS and Thomas J. BURNS

About the Human Condition in the Works of Dickens and Marx

A comprehensive social theory serves an important function: it can help organize an array of otherwise disparate facts into a coherent whole. A body of literature, by a different route, can do something comparable. In the hands of masters, social theory and storytelling can and do open doors to perceiving the social world in dramatic ways. Natural affinities exist between sociology and any number of other disciplines and this can be seen, for example, in Charles Tilly's work with the overlap and distinct aspects of history and sociology or in Lewis Coser's work about how stories illustrate various theoretical ideas in sociology such as anomie and class conflict.

Charles Dickens's novels offer the kind of insight into the subjective and inter-subjective realities of people which social scientists hope to glimpse but almost always seem to miss. Put another way, from a methodological standpoint, it is possible to see novels such as those of Dickens as "data," in the sense of its articulation of a worldview. Dickens asserts in the preface to *A Tale of Two Cities* that he took pains to ground the novel in historical fact. Yet a novelist like Dickens is after a deeper set of truths as well. There is, of course, the possibility of telling a large lie with lots of facts, each of them perhaps verifiably true. The novel seeks to do something akin to the opposite — to tell a larger truth with a series of fictional episodes. Dickens was a master at weaving a masterpiece from detail after detail of people, many of them from a largely ignored underclass, against the harsh backdrop of a society's crumbling feudal structure slowly, and inexorably giving way to industrial capitalism.

Two men, separated by language, nationality, and methodology, nevertheless profoundly influenced the social world of the emerging Industrial Revolution using complementary perspectives. Contemporaries Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Charles Dickens (1812-1870) addressed multiple crises of a new underclass in response to the unprecedented escalation of European capitalism. Dickens, through his own experience as a child laborer, illustrated the plight of the proletariat in books like *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. Marx's early interest in the evolution of economic production, coupled with Hegelian philosophical themes, resulted in *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*. "Dickens," Judith Newton says, "has been significant for traditional Marxist criticism in that his texts deal explicitly with social issues" (452). Marx wrote of Dickens and his fellow novelists that "the present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together" ("The English Middle Class" 4).

While the advent of the novel predates that of the discipline of sociology, both were born of the Enlightenment. The idea of the perfectibility of humanity was part of Auguste Comte's vision. Sociology as a discipline arose out of the conviction that human beings and their emergent institutions were amenable to scientific study. C.P. Snow articulated two cultures, one of science and its related tenets of positivism and the other a more humanistic variety. Comte had seen sociology falling squarely into the scientific realm, and yet much of sociological understanding has come as much from more humanistic studies as from strictly scientific sorts of endeavors. One of the chief proponents of this sort of approach was Kenneth Burke. Burke's "dramatism" put the emphasis on how people construct, maintain, communicate, and think in terms of the symbolic universes of which they are part. For Burke, thoughts and actions are facilitated or impeded by the symbol systems of a people (on recent applications of Burke's thought, see, e.g., Rutten; Soetaert, Bourgonjon, Rutten; Vandermeersche and Soetaert).

A symbol system acts as a "screen of perception" such that ways of seeing are profoundly influenced by the symbols we use to help us perceive them. These screens of perception would become so embedded in people's worldviews that they would not necessarily be obvious to the person relying on it (see Burke, *Grammar*; for an in-depth discussion, see Burns and LeMoyne). Pierre Bourdieu develops the idea of habitus and field. A habitus carries with it an entire worldview. Some novelists are better than others at capturing habitus. Tom Wolfe speaks volumes about the habitus of, for example, the selective college drinking fraternity and the southern U.S. mountain cultures in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. Yet few if any writers have withstood the test of time for the ability to capture in a few lines a habitus and the social field of which it is part like Dickens. Marx's theory of historical materialism

holds that different modes of economic production characterize every stage of history. In the early stages of communism, stories and songs told of the daily struggle to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. With the development of an increasingly complex society, these stories became divorced from the survival process and the storyteller split from the worker: "the bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers" (Marx, *Capital* 37). One perspective involves theorizing that literature became a muddy, abstract concept, tenuously attached to the economic base in the superstructure, reflecting only the traditions and mores of the ruling class (see Ngara). Yet we believe the story is much richer and more complex. Charles Dickens, haunted by his experiences as a child factory laborer, not only committed to paper the plight of the proletariat with literary flair and competence but also distributed this material with an ease once only granted to the elite. If the Industrial Revolution inflicted upon the proletariat suffering indignant enough to fill the pages of novels, it also offered, through advanced printing techniques and capitalistic marketing efforts, the advantage for mass distribution of these tales. After an oppressed people found a voice in Dickens, the ancient storyteller could reunite with tales of economic production. But where the primitive song, dance, and story once celebrated the harvest or the hunt, now these particular art forms lamented the ways in which the means of survival had been twisted and perverted by the Industrial Revolution.

Peter Lamarque writes that "works in the canonical literary tradition ... are thought to be especially valuable for holding up a mirror to life" (117). Literary characters act against cultural and social backdrops which influence their behavior and choices. To Marx and Friedrich Engels, the fact that the novel could represent an actual social milieu was a huge advantage. The realism disguised under literary devices could accomplish dual purposes, both as a means of provoking a new kind of "social consciousness" (Ngara 23) among the bourgeoisie and as a means of raising the proletariat's class consciousness. The upper class needed to know firsthand the sufferings of the poor. As Engels discovered in Manchester, the upper and middle classes commuted from country home to place of business or shopping without a glimpse of the byproducts of capitalism: the disfigured bodies, the rotting homes, the filth and hopelessness (see Wilson). Enclosed trains zipped the bourgeoisie to and from the center of town, keeping them ignorant of the smells of disease and stagnant water that represented the innards of the working-class world. Behind the small shops lining the main corridors lurked the "man behind the curtain": the displaced person, the child laborer, the hungry factory worker, who all kept the wheels of capitalism turning. Engels might have viewed this as the illusion of capitalism, for as long as those who control the means of production do not have to confront its realities, injustice will continue.

Marx believed that as class consciousness dawned upon the proletariat, they would understand that they must rise together against the bourgeoisie. One wonders if Marx believed his ideas, in written or oral form, were accessible or even comprehensible to the working class, whom he considered as the chosen people to fulfill his prophecy (see Wilson). With the serialization and mass distribution of Dickens's stories, however, the proletariat could begin to digest the real meat of Marxism. While some forms of science, such as philosophy, biology, and physics, can transmit facts, only art is able to transcend pure facts and become an experience (see Althusser). Popular literature can speak for the downtrodden and a variety of social injustices in a way that no philosophical pamphlet or political treatise can. Dave Laing's words in *The Marxist Theory of Art* ring true, "who are you if not a character from a novel?" (99). Dickens was able to deliver important social messages while engaging the reader through empathetic characters, sharp wit, and true-to-life situations. Like a sneak attack, it was as if the bourgeoisie never knew what hit them, or indeed, that they had been hit at all. And the proletariat, finally, were the new heroes of popular literature.

The first Marxist theme we discuss is the philosophy of social injustice under capitalism: "along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation" (Marx, *Capital* 836). When Engels traveled to Manchester with a member of the upper class, he commented on the wretched conditions and squalor found in the workers' quarters. Laborers, then, contribute to capital inasmuch as their productivity adds to the overall profit. They "must sell themselves piecemeal ... like every other article of commerce" (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

43). The bourgeoisie did not spend much time considering the plight of the underclass. "By the time of Dickens's story, poverty was a spectacle rather than a visible reality for many members of the middle and upper classes" (Jaffe 264). Jaffe also notes that capitalism produced so much distance between the classes that the chasms are not capable of being crossed without a spiritual guide. It is not with human eyes that the spirit lets Scrooge see Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim, but through the eyes of his class.

Scrooge's thriftiness and refusal to donate to the poor have helped contribute to his wealth. But the stacks of gold leave him cold, rattling like icy chains across the floor. As the snow falls, the meager fire – both at home and at work – fail to warm the capitalist. It is at this point that the spirits whisk Scrooge into another world, a world where he finally notices the social realities of England's inner-city squalor: "They left the busy scene and went into an obscure part of town, where Scrooge had never penetrated before ... the ways were foul and narrow, the shops and houses wretched, the people half naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offenses of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the straggling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth and misery" (*A Christmas Carol* 94). In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens frequently takes time out from the plotline to ridicule the middle class's opinion of the poor. In the following passage, the narrator discusses how the board makes decisions about the availability of food at the local workhouse: "they [the workhouse board] found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered – the poor people liked it [the workinghouse]! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar Elysium, where it was all play and no work ... so, they established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative ... of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it" (*Oliver Twist* 9). In comparison, Marx writes that "but frightful increase of 'deaths by starvation' in London during the last ten years proves beyond doubt the growing horror in which the working-people hold the slavery of the workhouse, that place of punishment for misery" (*Capital* 718). Pip's suffering at his sister's hands in *Great Expectations* symbolizes the lower class's subjection to the upper class. Pip's sister and relatives constantly remind the boy of his place in the world as an orphan and how he would be dead if not for the (quite meager) food and shelter grudgingly provided by his sister: "the tyranny exercised over Pip by his sister, Pumblechook, and their like is a type of the tyranny exercised by the conventionally 'superior' elements of society over the suffering and dispossessed" (Hagan 173).

In *Bleak House*, the simpleton Mr. Skimpole presents a picture of capitalism by discussing bees and why they should not be models of hard work: "then, after all, it was a ridiculous position to be smoked out of your fortune with brimstone as soon as you had made it" (108). Mr. Skimpole has presented the plight of the proletariat using the symbolism of the beehive. As a class, the proletariat are encouraged to work mindlessly, instinctively, and endlessly for a product which they will never see or own. They are "hands within the capitalist machinery, providing the grist for the mill of capital accumulation" (Clark and Foster 382). Later in *Bleak House*, two middle class men go to visit an ill baby at a brickmaker's home in the slums. Their experience personifies the introduction of the bourgeoisie to the worker's world, where homes reeked with daily floods of filthy water from the courtyards and coal smoke stained the walls and ceilings (see Clark and Foster). Death and disease hung in the stagnant air, inherent and imminent. Not only are the men shocked by the transition once over this threshold of the proletariat sector, but they are alarmed to hear a mother voice the opinion that her child would be better off dead than alive: "'Well, well,' says Mr. Bucket, 'you train him respectable, and he'll be a comfort to you, and look after you in your old age, you know.' 'I mean to try hard,' she answers, wiping her eyes. 'But I have been a-thinking ... of the many things that'll come in his way. My master will be against it, and he'll be beat, and see me beat, and made to fear his home, and perhaps to stray wild ... ain't it likely I should think of him as he lies in my lap now and wish he had died'" (*Bleak House* 323-24).

To expound on Marx's theme of exploitation, Dickens focuses on the plight of orphaned children in *David Copperfield*, those who have to work to earn their keep. The most autobiographical of all Dickens's works, *Copperfield* is an exposé of the darker workings in a society that considers itself enlightened. In the end, when David puts pen to paper and finds his calling, it is Dickens himself who has been avenged, though the price of transforming himself from child laborer into writer has turned "the

poet into a paid wage-labourer ... [a] necessary cost of the formation of the modern professional author" (Salmon 38). The second Marxist trope found in Dickens's work is the duality of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie: "our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms" (*The Communist Manifesto* 34). Marx's dialectic distills all of human history into a good versus evil tableau: "the Dialectic so simplifies the whole picture: it seems to concentrate the complexities of society into an obvious protagonist and antagonist" (Wilson 195). Dickens employed this theory of good and evil by using dualities throughout his novels.

Dickens's legendary opening line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1) represents the duality present in his and Marx's belief systems and literature. The dichotomy Marx and Dickens found in rural versus urban, proletariat versus bourgeoisie, the condemned versus the virtuous, and capitalism versus socialism may reflect, at their root, dualities of good and evil existing independently and concurrently in every individual and every society. Marx simplifies mankind's history first of all by defining the past through property ownership and modes of production. Secondly, he breaks down the ensuing problems as a struggle between the two camps over property and production modes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie: "as soon as the laborers are turned into proletarians, their means of labor into capital, as soon as the capitalist mode of production stands on its own feet, then the further socialization of labor and further transformation of the land and other means of production into socially exploited and, therefore, common means of production, as well as the further expropriation of private proprietors, takes a new form. That which is now to be expropriated is no longer the laborer working for himself, but the capitalist exploiting many laborers. This expropriation is accomplished by the action of the immanent laws of capitalistic production itself, by the centralization of capital. One capitalist always kills many" (*Capital* 836). Compare this theme of good versus evil in *Great Expectations*: "city is poised against country, experience against innocence" (Stange 10). Pip's life out on the marshes lies in stark contrast with the genteel Satis House and the upscale, fast-paced world of London. To further the plot of *Great Expectations*, Dickens takes every opportunity to contrast dualities: "the world of 'respectability' and the world of ignominy; of oppressors and of oppressed; of the living and of the dead" (Hagan 177).

In *Oliver Twist*, the contradictions between light and dark are frequently employed to symbolize the interplay between good and evil: "the moral world of *Oliver Twist* is polarized by extremes of vice and virtue" (Sanders 62). Oliver's first meeting with Fagin the thief occurs as the boy ascends a dimly-lit staircase: "Oliver, groping his way with one hand, and having the other firmly grasped by his companion, ascended with much difficulty the dark and broken stairs" (*Oliver Twist* 48). Fagin's thieves typify a capitalistic enterprise, with every man's effort rewarded by a prize. However, in spite of this entrepreneurial spirit, members of the group do not trust one another and they form a dysfunctional sort of organization. One man, Sikes, even ends up murdering a member of the gang, Nancy. At the opposite end of the spectrum exist groups such as the one found at the Maylie household, where everyone sacrifices and shares in order to produce communistic harmony (Sanders 58). Oliver's story culminates in the "redistribution of wealth from the haves to the secretly entitled have-nots" (Fowler 107). Sanders's study of Dickens as a comic writer suggests that Dickens used humor to deliver a more potent message of morality. The Dickensian reader laughs his way through reading about the punishment or public exposure of evil, such as when Sikes unintentionally hangs himself in *Oliver Twist*.

The next Marxist theme embedded in Dickens's novels is the notion of class consciousness. An individual must first meet his or her basic needs before tackling political or social issues. Once these survival needs are met, Marx argues, the process of consciousness can develop. Consciousness evolves from the initial awareness of surroundings, to the consciousness that other individuals exist apart from self and finally to the "emancipation" of consciousness into the realms of philosophy and theology. This liberation of the consciousness occurs when social relations come into conflict with the forces of production; meeting at the place where our social existence determines our consciousness. For Marx, a class must understand its position in relation to economic production. Without the proletariat classifying itself as such, and then unifying through common goals and ideals, the revolution cannot be expected to come to pass. In *Great Expectations*, Pip gets his first taste of class awareness when Miss Haversham instructs Estella to play a card game with him: "With this boy! Why, he is a common labouring-boy!" (46). When Pip walks home from his first visit to Satis House, he feels

shame, hyper-aware of his low-class surroundings: "I set off on the four-mile walk to our forge; pondering, as I went along, on all I had seen, and deeply revolving that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick; that I had fallen into a despicable habit of calling knaves jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way" (*Great Expectations* 50). In the beginning of the novel, Pip brings food to Magwitch the convict, observing that the man's method of eating reminds him of a dog devouring its food. Later at Satis House, Pip is fed like a dog when Estella places his food on the ground without looking at him. This similarity shows Pip's emerging consciousness about his place in the hierarchy of economic class. Magwitch is animal-like to Pip, beneath him as a convict. But to Estella, Pip is lower than human, or at least lower than she, as he is forced to retrieve his food from the courtyard ground. The street urchin Jo is quite aware of his place in the world in *Bleak House*. Rewarded for information with a penny and some leftover scraps of meat, Jo knows that he is valuable to certain members of the middle class only because he possesses knowledge that they desire: "And there he sits, munching and gnawing, and looking up at the great cross on the summit of St. Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red-and-violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city — so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams — everything moving on to some purpose and to one end — until he is stirred up and told to 'move on' too" (*Bleak House* 283).

A final theme symbolized in Dickens's novels concerns sacrifice and revolution. Marx's ideal communist existence requires both sacrifice and revolution. One cannot be had without the other. "For Marxism, history possessed a teleological goal, unconsciously powered by a class struggle, which hastened the onward march of the forces of production" (Jones 14). In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge must die, even if figuratively, in order to be reborn. The third spirit facilitates Scrooge's journey through this symbolic death. This resurrection theme echoes throughout *A Christmas Carol*, not only through Scrooge's birth-to-death trip, but also through the unspoken theme of resurrection that exemplifies the Christmas season itself (see Jaffe). Fundamental Marxism asks man to sacrifice his material goods, giving all to the revolution for the benefit of the social collective. Scrooge's acknowledgment of his own mortality, in addition to the possible unjust death of others like Tiny Tim, causes a change of heart, and he begins handing out money and gifts: "the *Carol* suggests that the way back to life lies through empathy with the suffering of the dead" (Saint-Amour 108). It is this resurrected man who, by sacrificing his own material goods, will herald a brighter tomorrow. Dickens's protagonist, while not a member of the proletariat, nevertheless delivers a powerful message to the upper and middle classes. Capitalism produces inequality and hence damns those who profit from it at the expense of the oppressed. Only by sacrificing one's fortune and self today will a better future come about. Marley's ghost warns Scrooge about the impending haunts. "The simple future tense, the clarity about where Scrooge's present path will lead, the exact hour of the visitation — all of these speak to a predetermined future" (Saint-Amour 96). Marx, as a determinist, also predicts the future, leaving no doubt as to the final days: "what the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable" (*The Communist Manifesto* 51). *A Tale of Two Cities* cannot have a happy ending without Sydney Carton's sacrifice. He understands, as the lower classes must also, that unless he gives everything, the promise of a new, peaceful future will remain unfulfilled. Carton takes Darnay's place at the guillotine because he loves Darnay's wife, Lucie, so much that he wishes her happiness above all else. This sacrifice symbolizes Marx's belief that a bloody revolution, along with loss of life, will result in the long-awaited synthesis. "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known" (*A Tale of Two Cities* 321).

The above Marxist themes embedded in the works of Dickens reveal how disciplines inform each other. If, for a moment, Marx appears an apologist for feudalism, stating that the proletariat "seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages" (*The Communist Manifesto* 45), Dickens takes this nostalgia a step further by exposing the bitterness of industrialism that can only be cured by small doses of village know-how. Jeremy Hawthorn theorizes that the resolution in *Oliver Twist* exemplifies the tug of war taking place during England's Industrial Revolution: "the concealments and corruptions of a modern society, in which people are forced to deal with those they do

not know, can be resolved through the use of those skills of interpersonal perception that serve to distinguish truth from falsity in a small community" (116). In other words, in the battle of industrialization, the proletariat countrymen — whose "motley feudal ties" (*The Communist Manifesto* 37) were conspicuously absent from the urban landscape — have unique skills which will facilitate a successful entry into this new, modern way of life while the revolution simmers right below the surface. Charles Dickens and Karl Marx both attempted to turn the social world on its head. In the opening scene of *Great Expectations*, the escaped convict dangles Pip from his heels, inviting, as Marx does, the audience to see the world from a different perspective (see Stange). When David Copperfield spends an idyllic visit with the Peggotty family, he stays at their home constructed out of an upside-down boat, an edifice symbolizing the spread of capitalism across the seas, a new world order that must be turned topsy-turvy.

In conclusion, careful inspection of period literature such as Dickens's novels can unearth a theoretical framework. This conclusion has implications for the further examination of the underlying theoretical forces of a particular moment in history. Marx and Dickens had a number of parallels in the social reality they perceived. Dickens was, more than Marx himself, the embodiment of an intellectual vanguard born of the proletariat. His writing was embedded in a way of seeing the world that had a genuineness that, at least for some readers, eluded Marx. In any case, the works of Marx and Dickens serve as a complement to the other. They were writing at a similar time and place and looking at many of the same social problems in resonant ways. In whatever genre, a distinguishing characteristic of a master is the ability to combine scope of vision with detail and depth of vision. It is here that masters such as Marx and Dickens are ideal. How are we to gain social knowledge? Learning about how people find meaning is one of the richest ways to do this. The social sciences and the humanities serve as complementary ways of knowing. Each is embedded in its own symbols systems and ways of seeing. One possible framework for comparing and contrasting comparative literature with social theory is with Burke's dramatisitic pentad of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. A given social act has all of these components, and yet each has its own unique combinations. Agents act in social situations, even as they are more or less constrained by the scene of which they are part. As Marx pointed out, people make history, but rarely in circumstances of their own choosing. A given social theory may emphasize different aspects of this pentad. Even within a theoretical tradition, the emphasis may vary. A structural Marxist (e.g., Althusser) may emphasize the "scene" of the class structure, while a more ideologically oriented thinker in the Marxist tradition may focus more on how actors may enter into a hegemonic symbol system to act on the system and thereby bring about meaningful social change. Far beyond a mere set of footnotes about parallels between the works of authors, in this case Dickens and Marx, or an occasional interesting observation about how one author might shed light on another, we find that the sorts of explorations we describe herein serve as rich avenues of pedagogy in their own right. Disciplinary boundaries sometimes make sense, but the complexities of some subjects suggest moving beyond traditional disciplinary parochialism. Ideally, complementary approaches can inform one another and lead to deeper understanding in both areas. The social sciences and the humanities have a number of natural affinities that remain underexplored. Literary criticism has been at times informed by the social sciences. It has been more rare for the focus to go the other way. Whether this has been a failure of a potentially rich aspect of the sociological imagination is a matter of conjecture, but there most certainly is possibility for intellectual cross fertilization.

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Author's profile: Ami E. Stearns is working toward her Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Oklahoma and teaches courses in introductory sociology. Her areas of scholarship include literature censorship, feminism, and the sociology of deviance. She is currently working on a book-length project entitled *See Jane Read*, in which she examines the role that frequently banned books play in signaling normative boundaries for young women. E-mail: <ami.e.stearns-1@ou.edu>.

Author's profile: Thomas J. Burns teaches sociology and religious studies at the University of Oklahoma. He studies and writes on social institutions from a comparative and historical perspective. His work examines how cultural and organizational systems, such as religion, education, and politics develop in relation to one another in light of their comparative and historical contexts, and how those systems have social outcomes in terms of human well being and long-term sustainability. Burns's recent publications include *This Side of Eden: Culture and the Natural Environment in Late-Modernity* (2012) and "Epistemology, Culture and Rhetoric: Some Social Implications of Human Cognition," *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* (with Terri LeMoyné, 2003). E-mail: <tburns@ou.edu>.